

**‘NO SUFFRAGETTE SAW HERSELF IN MY MIRROR’:
EVOLUTIONARY AND BIOLOGICAL DISCOURSE IN *ANN VERONICA*.¹**

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In his *Experiment in Autobiography* Wells affirms the importance of the biological sciences as having made the most ‘vivid, sustained attempt to see life clearly and to see it whole, to see into it, to see its inter-connexions, to find out, so far as terms were available, what it was, where it came from, what it was doing and where it was going’.² For all the excitement and intellectual ferment of the ‘pervasive project of alteration’ (*AV*, 116) in the metropolitan milieu of socialists, suffragettes and Fabians in which his eponymous protagonist is caught up, *Ann Veronica* reflects Wells’s own fascination with biology as the lynch pin around which human life revolves. This essay explores how and why Wells consistently returns to biological discourse to explain seemingly disparate aspects of human behaviour from the initial attraction between Ann Veronica and Capes to Ann Veronica’s ultimate destiny as a wife and mother.

After protracted disagreements with her father, Ann Veronica leaves home and enrolls as a student at the Imperial College, London University at a time when women were struggling to overcome prejudice against their entry into higher education and suffragette militancy was at its height. The key insight the novel affords is that a ‘new woman’ such as Ann Veronica is herself at the end of a long evolutionary process. Although Wells was ‘far from endorsing the Social Darwinist’s view of a moral order entirely compatible with, because exactly analogous to, the natural scheme of conflict in a brute struggle for existence’ he did believe that human beings were still subject to instinctual drives derived from ape-like ancestors.³ By a process of extension and concatenation, biology, with its tentacular generalisations, becomes the novel’s dominant metaphor whereby the reader is invited to understand disparate contemporary social phenomena, including the sexual behaviour of men and women. Moreover, the novel never strays far from the biological imperative of race-motherhood by which eugenicists defined the modern woman in an evolving society.⁴ *Ann Veronica* pinpoints

¹ H. G. Wells, *Ann Veronica* (London: Virago, 1980). All quotations are from this edition and are enclosed in the main body of my text. Material used in this essay appears in different but recognizable form in Maroula Joannou, “‘Chloe Liked Olivia’: The Woman Scientist, Sex and Suffrage”, in *Literature, Science, Psychoanalysis, 1830-1970: Essays in Honour of Gillian Beer*, ed. Helen Small and Trudi Tate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 195-211.

² H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (since 1886)*, 2 vols, [1934] (London: Faber and Faber, 1984) vol.1, 210.

³ See H. G. Wells: *Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction*, ed. Robert M. Philmus and David Y. Hughes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 179-80.

⁴ For a discussion of race-motherhood see Anna Davin, ‘Imperialism and Motherhood’, *History Workshop Journal*, 5 (1978), 9-66.

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tensions and contradictions inherent in biological definitions of women and feminist aspirations to freedom and equality. It also illustrates the confusion inherent in attempts to explain the social and political in biological discourse.

Ann Veronica first attends anatomy classes at the Tredgold Women's College where she chafes at the lady B.Sc. who is 'hopelessly wrong and foggy' about the skull which is 'the test of the good comparative anatomist' (*AV*, 5). Wells is almost certainly alluding to the standards of teaching in Bedford College which prompted a heated correspondence initiated by Karl Pearson in the *Pall Mall Gazette*.⁵ She becomes a student of advanced anatomy at the Imperial College, London where 'the infidel Russell' (*AV*, 24) is based. The Imperial College had grown out of the Normal School of Science where Wells had attended Huxley's lectures, securing a first-class degree in zoology in 1890. The influence of Huxley on Wells's subsequent intellectual development was profound and in his autobiography Wells pays tribute to the 'fundamental magnificence of Darwin's and Huxley's achievement' in putting the 'fact of organic evolution upon an impregnable base of proof and demonstration'.⁶

The imagery of the natural world pervades *Ann Veronica* which contains many analogies between the behaviour of human beings and other living things. Ann Veronica thinks of 'all married people much as one thinks of insects that have lost their wings, and of her sisters as new hatched creatures who had scarcely had wings' (*AV*, 18). She is reminded of her own affinities to the animal world and examining the fine hair on her arm remarks: 'Etherealized monkey' (*AV*, 148). In a visit to the Zoological Gardens she admires the gentle humanity in the eyes of the chimpanzees which she considers to be 'so much more human than human beings' (*AV*, 223). Wells also likens the suffragettes in prison with their 'barkings, yappings, roarings, pelican chattering, and feline yowlings, interspersed with shrieks of hysterical laughter' to carnivores (*AV*, 205).

The setting of much of *Ann Veronica* is the biology laboratory where animal life is 'pairing and breeding and selection, and again pairing and breeding' and her own desire for love also comes to seem 'only a translated generalisation of that assertion' (*AV*, 142). Here Ann Veronica learns how to understand herself primarily as a biological being and to recognize that 'she in her own person too, was this eternal Bios, beginning again its recurrent journey to selection and multiplication and failure or survival' (*AV*, 134).

In *Ann Veronica* biology is presented as 'an extraordinarily *digestive* science' which 'throws out a number of broad experimental generalisations, and then sets out to bring into harmony or relation with these an infinitely multifarious collection of phenomena' (*AV*, 134). For Ann Veronica, as for Wells, the explanatory powers of

⁵ Rosaleen Love, "'Alice in Eugenics Land": Feminism and Eugenics in the Scientific Careers of Alice Lee and Ethel Elderton', *Annals of Science*, 36 (1970), 145-58 (146).

⁶ *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 1, 203.

science extend far beyond the laboratory and into all

spheres of human interaction. The realisation dawns upon her that:

This slowly elaborating biological scheme had something more than an academic interest for herself. And not only so, but that it was, after all, a more systematic and particular method of examining just the same questions that underlay the discussions of the Fabian Society, the talk of the West Central Arts Club, the chatter of the studios, and the deep, bottomless discussions of the simple-life homes. It was the same Bios whose nature and drift and ways and methods and aspects engaged them all. (*AV*, 134)

Wells's understanding of the 'Bios' is, of course, far removed from the mysterious inner life force which D. H. Lawrence believed to drive the physical and inner life of plants and animals – Lawrence's first nature poems were published in 1909. Neither was Wells interested in 'animal vitality' or in Lawrentian ideas about the links between sex, the primitive unconscious and the power of nature as antidotes to the evils of modern industrialized society. *Pace* Beatrice Webb, who thought that Wells, like Shaw and Granville-Barker, was 'obsessed with the rabbit-warren aspect of human society,' *Ann Veronica* contains no description of an explicitly sexual nature, although its unwarranted reputation as a salacious novel led Wells to complain that 'if I had been a D. H. Lawrence, with every fig leaf pinned aside, I could not have been considered more improper than I was.'⁷

Wells claimed the importance of *Ann Veronica* lay in his depiction of a youthful desiring subject 'allowed a frankness of desire and sexual enterprise'.⁸ As Jane Lewis puts it: 'Only in sexual relations did Wells tend to treat women as equals, in terms of sexual desire, the willingness to take the sexual initiative, and capacity for sexual pleasure.'⁹ His 'particular offence was that *Ann Veronica* was a virgin who fell in love and showed it'. Moreover, it was 'an unspeakable offence that an adolescent female should be sex-conscious before the thing was forced upon her attention'.¹⁰ As Wells, who was remarkably in advance of most socialists of his day in wanting to put questions of sex, marriage, reproductive rights, divorce, and the family centrally on both the political and the literary agenda, frequently pointed out, the nature of the marriage contract 'was outside the scope of Socialist proposals altogether'.¹¹

⁷ Beatrice Web, 13 March 1910, *The Diary of Beatrice Webb*, 6 vols, ed. Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, vol. 3: 1905-1924, 'The Power to Alter Things' (London: Virago, 1984), 137; *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 2, 472.

⁸ *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 2, 470.

⁹ Jane Lewis, 'Intimate Relations Between Men and Women: the Case of H. G. Wells and Amber Pember Reeves', *History Workshop Journal*, 37 (1994), 76-98 (93).

¹⁰ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 2, 470.

¹¹ Wells, *First and Last Things: A Confession of Faith and Rule of Life* (London: Constable, 1908),

Ann Veronica evokes contemporary controversies associated with feminists such as Frances Swiney and Catherine Hartley who contended that women were charged with the responsibility to regenerate the human race because they had reached a higher state of evolutionary development. In *The Awakening of Women* Swiney argued that:

In the lowest of living creatures, life began in the elementary womb of the all-mother; the centre of nutrition, of conservation, and of self-reproduction. Life is feminine and organic life begins with the single-mother cell. Science has, moreover, abundantly proved that in the mysterious evolution of sex, the male element was first non-existent; and on its initial appearance was primarily an excrescence, a superfluity, a waste product of Nature.¹²

In *Ann Veronica* such views are espoused by the character of Nettie Miniver, a militant suffragette: “Originally in the first animals there were no males. It has been proved.” Moreover, “The primitive government was the Matriarchate! The Matriarchate! The Lords of Creation just ran about and did what they were told” (*AV*, 31). “Science some day may teach us a way to do without them” (*AV*, 144). In *Ann Veronica*, Capes launches a ‘vigorous and damaging attack on Lester Ward’s case for the primitive matriarchate and the predominant importance of the female throughout the animal kingdom’ (*AV*, 141) in the *Nineteenth Century*. Ward was an American sociologist whose controversial theories about the innate superiority of the female species had been expounded in *Pure Sociology* (1903).¹³

Like Wells, Capes is initially dismissive of Ward’s work, but changes his mind because he jocularly recognizes *Ann Veronica* as a High Priestess to be worshipped: “You have converted me to – Lester Ward!” (*AV*, 284). Wells makes the point that ‘separate spheres’ arguments which idealize women simultaneously refuse them equal rights of citizenship through the character Manning, who describes himself as a ‘Socialist of the order of John Ruskin’ (*AV*, 40). Manning speaks of women as ‘our Madonnas, our Saint Catherines, our Mona Lisas, our goddesses and angels and fairy princesses’ (*AV*, 40). This language echoes the debate between J. S. Mill and John Ruskin, specifically the second of Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies* lectures, ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’ (1864-5) when Ruskin urged women to accept their role as the moral guardians of men: ‘I would make this country a collective monarchy, and all the girls and women in it should be the queen. They should never come into contact with

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¹² Catherine Hartley, *The Truth about Women* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1913), Frances Swiney, *The Awakening of Women or Woman’s Part in Evolution* (London: William Reeves, 1908), 9.

¹³ Lester F. Ward, *Pure Sociology: A Treatise on the Origin and Spontaneous Development of a Society* (London: Macmillan, 1903).

politics or economics – or any of those things’ (*AV*, 40-1).¹⁴

Why Wells disliked the use of pseudo-scientific arguments and the misuse of evolutionary theory to support the case that women’s kinship to the animals is

hardly recognizable was that such arguments separated women’s ‘base’ physical instincts from their ‘higher’ spiritual selves denying the importance of women’s bodily and sexual needs. Wells was close enough to the Victorian legacy of sexual inhibition and the pre-Freudian denial of the female orgasm to recognize their dangers. Thus his insistence on Ann Veronica’s affinity to the animal kingdom and his depiction of a central protagonist who is emphatic in affirming the importance of her sexual desires.

The *dramatis personae* of *Ann Veronica* reflects the debates between supporters of the ‘new’ and the traditional in the sciences. Ann Veronica’s father, an amateur petrographer who “went in” for microscopy in the unphilosophical Victorian manner as his “hobby” (*AV*, 8) is attracted to the Mendelians who are opposed to the big names of the 1890s. The rediscovery of Mendelian genetics in 1900 appeared to illuminate many of the enigmas surrounding heredity. Ann Veronica is aware that a ‘vigorous fire of mutual criticism was going on now between the Imperial College and the Cambridge Mendelians and is echoed in her lectures’ (*AV*, 133). At its simplest, Mendel’s thesis was that children were the product of a combination of ‘free’ genetic substances issuing from the mother and father and desirable physical attributes were of major significance in the selection of a partner. Modern science thus affirmed the importance of natural selection in the process of human mating which had been obfuscated by the Victorian obsession with property and propriety in a fashion which Wells found attractive. The Eugenics Education Society was founded in 1907 to encourage ‘superior’ people to reproduce themselves.

The idea of genetic improvement appealed strongly to intellectuals on the left such as Sylvia Pankhurst and George Bernard Shaw. Eugenics, which Darwin’s cousin, Francis Galton, termed the ‘science of good breeding’, found favour with evolutionary-minded scientists like Wells who wanted to improve the quality of the human race by the manipulation of human heredity.¹⁵ However, Galton, who coined the term ‘eugenics’ in 1880, perceived eugenics essentially as an ‘extension of nineteenth-century social Darwinism, reflective of some conservative values and interests of the identical social groups’.¹⁶ Five of the fourteen researchers in the Eugenics Laboratory at University College, London were women.¹⁷ Moreover, as Karl

¹⁴ See John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, ed. Deborah Epstein Nord (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (London: Macmillan, 1883), 24-5.

¹⁶ Diane B. Paul, ‘Eugenics and the Left’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 45 (1984), 567-89 (568).

¹⁷ Richard Allen Soloway, ‘Feminism, Fertility and Eugenics in Edwardian Britain’, in *Political*

Pearson, explained to Galton: ‘women who in many cases have taken higher academic honours than men and are intellectually their peers. They were a little tried therefore when your name appeared on the Committee of the Anti-Suffrage Society.’¹⁸

Eugenicists on both the left and the right eulogized the function of the ‘superior’ woman as wife and mother. Maternity did not merely require a woman to give birth but that she relinquish her ambitions outside the home. Because the willing co-operation of the mother was essential to the nurturing and education of the young it was necessary to convert ‘superior’ women to the task of ‘race preservation’ by convincing them of the importance of their ordained work as mothers of children.¹⁹ As Lucy Bland suggests, middle-class women appearing to ‘shirk’ their ‘racial duty’ to breed was often attributed to the ‘invidious effects of feminism’.²⁰ If, as eugenicists argued, racial degeneration were to be halted by judiciously adjusting the birth rate, women like Ann Veronica must voluntarily relinquish any aspirations for higher education and professional careers.

As a student, Ann Veronica falls in love with Capes, a married demonstrator at the Imperial College. Ann Veronica and Capes are cast as the defenders of Modern Science which will free humanity from sexual repression. Wells regarded conventional sexual morality as the obstacle to better breeding and racial regeneration. The novel reflects his deep-rooted objections to the Victorian moral legacy which placed impediments in the way of human mating by choice. As he later wrote in *The New Machiavelli*: ‘It is not so much moral decadence that will destroy us as moral inadaptability. The old code fails under the new needs.’²¹

Wells placed his hopes for a better future on the state endowment of motherhood on which ‘economic freedom and the independent citizenship of women, and indeed also the welfare of the whole next generation’ were dependent.²² ‘Endowment of Motherhood’ is written in letters of light across the ‘cloud paradise of an altered world in which the Goopes and Minivers, the Fabians and reforming people believed’ (*AV*, 184). Moreover, Ann Veronica speculates that if ‘in some complex yet conceivable way women were endowed, were no longer economically and socially dependent on men’ (*AV*, 184) she would be free to go to Capes without burdening him with obligations. As feminist critics have pointed out, the idea of attractive young women making themselves sexually available to men without requiring economic support

Symbolism in Modern Europe, ed. Seymour Drescher et al. (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1982), 121-46 (121).

¹⁸ Quoted in Love, “‘Alice in Eugenics Land’”, 146.

¹⁹ See Jean Eason, ‘The Eugenics Revolution: an Inquiry into the Relation of Eugenics to Ideologies of Gender and the Role of Women’, M.A. Dissertation in Women’s Studies, Anglia Polytechnic University, 1994, 55.

²⁰ Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality, 1885-1914* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), 226.

²¹ H. G. Wells, *The New Machiavelli* (London: John Lane, 1911), 413.

²² Wells, *First and Last Things*, 214.

clearly contains an element of wish fulfilment on the part of Wells whose support for women's sexual freedom is premised on his own sexual and emotional needs.²³ Whatever personal qualities he might admire and personify in Ann Veronica, it is clear that her human counterparts existed for him primarily as potential sexual partners.²⁴

Ann Veronica relinquishes a scientific career to start a family with Capes. With a pregnant Ann Veronica reunited with the respectable middle-class family from which she had escaped, to which an unrepentant Capes is somewhat improbably welcomed as a new son-in-law, the epicene, independent new woman of the novel's opening is reformulated into the anodyne non-threatening New Mother. Through Ann Veronica's pregnancy Wells illustrates his conviction that physical desire between superior people should rarely be separated from procreation. As Richard Remington, a character in *The New Machiavelli*, observes: 'Physical love without children is a little weak, timorous, more than a little shameful. With imaginative people there comes a time when it is impossible for that to go on.'²⁵

Ann Veronica's conclusion is: 'A woman wants a proper alliance with a man, a man who is better stuff than herself. [...] She wants to be free – she wants to be legally and economically free, so as not to be subject to the wrong man; but only God, who made the world, can alter things to prevent her being slave to the right one' (*AV*, 206). Here, as elsewhere, Ann Veronica articulates Wells's beliefs in biological essentialisms; the grounding in nature of fetishised relationships seen through the refracted ideology of the time which presents them as naturalized and not subject to change. A woman is to be freed from economic wrongs but only to arrive at eugenically blessed union predicated on submissiveness to a man who, in the evolutionary discourse which permeates the whole novel, is 'better stuff' than herself. With her marriage to Capes, Ann Veronica returns voluntarily to the very state of domesticity which she had fled her suburban home to escape. As Ann Veronica contemplates her future with Capes the reader is presented with evolution in reverse: 'Modern indeed! She was going to be primordial as chipped flint!' (*AV*, 260).

The most influential forum for left-leaning intellectuals of Wells's day was the Fabian Society: 'Fabianism was Socialism, so far as the exposition of views and policy went,' wrote Wells: 'There was no other Socialist propaganda in England worth considering.'²⁶ Wells's controversial attempt to depose the 'Old Gang' who dominated the executive (Sydney Webb, Hubert Bland and George Bernard Shaw) and to 'turn the Fabian Society inside out and then throw it into the dustbin' had little

²³ See Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel 1880-1920* (London: Virago, 1994), 170-1 and Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* (London: Methuen, 1979), 193.

²⁴ See Stubbs, 193.

²⁵ *The New Machiavelli*, 324.

²⁶ *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 1, 247.

success.²⁷ With remarkable persistence he kept presenting the society with projects on the endowment of motherhood until the scandal caused by his affair with Amber Reeves, the daughter of two prominent Fabians, forced him to resign. The Fabians did eventually publish a tract on the endowment of motherhood, a ‘pallid, actuarial treatment that did not mention Wells, even in the bibliography’ and described himself in a letter to *The Freewoman* in 1912 as ‘one who had staked his poor reputation for intelligence on the State Endowment of Motherhood’.²⁸

Ann Veronica tells us far more about Wells’s vendetta against the Fabians, depicted in *The New Machiavelli* (in which Beatrice Webb is pilloried as Altiora Bailey), than about the worthwhile intellectual initiatives with which the society was associated. The meeting of the Fabian Society Ann Veronica attends consists of a ‘great variety of Goopes-like types’ (*AV*, 115) – Goopes is a fruitarian – and the ‘discussion there was the oddest mixture of things that were personal and petty with an idealistic devotion that was fine beyond dispute’ (*AV*, 115-6). Samuel Hynes suggests that Wells’s motive was ‘simply spleen; Wells used his fiction to revenge himself upon his enemies. Having broken with the Fabians, he promptly turned them into fiction.’²⁹

There is, moreover, a notable contrast between the intellectual strength of the Fabian Society, its women in particular, and their representation in *Ann Veronica*. The Fabian Women’s Group, founded in 1908, included respected trade unionists like Margaret Bondfield and Mary Macarthur, as well as Beatrice Webb and Maud Pember Reeves (Amber’s mother). Twenty members went to prison for the vote. The group lobbied the Home Secretary about the forcible feeding of suffragettes and campaigned successfully to include formal equality between the sexes in the society’s written aims.³⁰ The publication of two major investigative reports, Maud Pember Reeves’s *Round About a Pound a Week* (1909-1913), a study of how working class women in Lambeth managed their lives, and Beatrice Webb’s *Minority Commission on the Poor Law* (1909), published the same year as *Ann Veronica*, demonstrated that the Fabian Society on whom he poured derision had a far stronger investment in practical political projects than Wells himself.

Wells’s account of the affair with Amber Reeves attributes responsibility in equal measure, insists Amber’s pregnancy was her own idea, and that he ‘made no attempt to question this sudden philo-progenitiveness in her’.³¹ Moreover, their subsequent behaviour was a principled defiance of outdated middle-class morality: ‘Amber and I clung most desperately to the idea that we were sustaining some high and novel

²⁷ Quoted by Jean and Norman MacKenzie, *The Time Traveller: The Life of H. G. Wells* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973), 195.

²⁸ Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 120; H. G. Wells, Letter to *The Freewoman*, 7 March 1912, 202-3 (202).

²⁹ Hynes, 120.

³⁰ Margaret Cole, *The Story of Fabian Socialism* (London: Heinemann, 1961), 126.

³¹ *H. G. Wells in Love: Postscript to an Experiment in Autobiography* (London: Faber, 1984), 80.

standard against an obtuse and ignoble world.’³² Beatrice Webb, whose religious and moral sensibilities were deeply affronted by the behaviour of both parties (Amber being ‘very clever, but a terrible little pagan – vain, egotistical, and careless of other people’s happiness’) offers a censorious account of what happened in her diary, referring to the ‘blackguardism of Wells’ and his ‘total

incapacity for decent conduct’.³³ He ‘seduced Amber within the very walls of Newnham, having been permitted, as an old friend, to go to her room’ and ‘taught her to lie, and to spend, and to grasp every enjoyment and advantage for herself’.³⁴ However, Webb speculates that this is ‘one of those rare cases where the punishment will far more heavily on the man than on the woman’.³⁵

Wells was tendentially attracted to independent, resourceful women whose intelligence he respected, a number of whom had worked actively for the vote. Rebecca West had written to *The Scotsman* about women’s suffrage as a fourteen year old schoolgirl and worked briefly in the W.S.P.U. offices in Edinburgh. Dorothy Richardson, another feminist, had a miscarriage shortly after visiting the suffragettes in Holloway in 1907.³⁶ Violet Hunt was a fundraiser for the W.S.P.U. and spoke frequently on their platforms. It is through such friendships that Wells acquired the intimate knowledge of feminist politics that informs his fiction.

Wells’s attitude to the vote was complicated but remarkably consistent. He was an adult suffragist, deeply sceptical about the long-term significance of the vote but not about the ‘slower and wider campaign of “Why Not?” in which I played my little part.’³⁷ His name appeared alongside Thomas Hardy and E. M. Forster on the list of prominent men supporting the vote drawn up by the Men’s League for Women’s Suffrage in 1909. Writing for the first time in a specifically feminist publication, *The Freewoman*, in 1911, he summarized his position thus: ‘I want to see women have votes because I believe the vote may be a useful educational symbol (even if it prove temporarily a political nuisance) in the necessary work of establishing the citizenship of women.’ He added: ‘I do my best to avoid the present suffrage agitation because it over-accentuates all those sexual differences. I want to minimize and shakes my faith in the common humanity of women. It is, unhappily impossible to escape it altogether.’³⁸

Wells was deeply hostile to the social purity element within the organized feminist movement as represented in the W.S.P.U slogan: ‘Votes for Women and Chastity for

³² *H. G. Wells in Love*, 82.

³³ Webb, *Diary*, 15 September 1908, vol 3, 98; 27 September 1909, 125; 5 November 1910, 147.

³⁴ *Diary*, 5 November 1910, 147.

³⁵ *Diary*, 20 March 1910, 138.

³⁶ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own: from Bronte to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1978), 252.

³⁷ *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 2, 487.

³⁸ Wells, ‘Mr. Asquith will Die’, *The Freewoman*, 7 December 1911, 47.

Men'. He maintained that the endowment of motherhood and not any 'petty political enfranchisement' must 'surely constitute the real Magna Charta of women' complaining that any suggestion that 'feminism had anything to do with sexual health and happiness, was repudiated by these ladies with flushed indignation'.³⁹ The vocal social purity section within the suffrage movement campaigned to bring about an end to prostitution, venereal disease, child abuse, and the other social ills they associated with sex. Their proselytizing continence

and dislike of the human body is ridiculed in through Nettie Miniver in *Ann Veronica*: "Bodies! bodies! Horrible things! We are souls. Love lives on a higher plane. We are not animals. If I ever did meet a man I could love, I should love him" – her voice dropped again – "Platonically" (*AV*, 44).

In part, Wells's lukewarm attitude to the vote was due to his dislike of separatist politics: he felt personally threatened by women's networks and alliances that existed independently of men. Moreover, he was convinced that women's oppression was economic and had little interest in other possible explanations of their subordination. Thus the earlier sections of *Ann Veronica* that deal with the economic realities of the protagonist's attempted bid for freedom rank with the finest of the turn-of-century 'New Woman' novels in their powerful evocation of an intelligent young woman's sense of entrapment at home; the stultifying restrictions of Edwardian suburban life, and her struggle to exert her right to autonomy and freedom.

In *Ann Veronica* Wells depicts, with consummate skill and perspicacity, the plight of a vulnerable young woman trekking the streets of London in search of work. Ann Veronica is sexually molested, jibes against the unavoidable obligation to some individual man, and is humiliated by the determinist terms in which the entreaties from her brother, Rodney, to admit defeat and return home are couched: 'the only possible trade for a girl that isn't sweated is to get hold of a man and make him do it for her. [...] It's providence. That's how things are; and that's the order of the world' (*AV*, 100). Her keen sense of injustice experienced at first hand drives Ann Veronica to seek redress in the vote and to join the suffragettes. She is arrested for her part in the 'pantehnicon raid' on parliament, very like the one in February 1908. However, this is where the suffragettes and Wells part company. Wells's purpose in consigning his protagonist to Canongate Prison appeared to be to reinforce her dislike of the company of other women: "The real reason why I am out of place here", she said, "is because I like men. I can talk with them. I've got no feminine class feeling. I don't want any laws or freedoms to protect me from a man like Mr. Capes" (*AV*, 205-6).

Suffragists sometimes found themselves at loggerheads with Wells because of their unrealistically high expectations of a writer whose assertive heroines had been role models in shaping their personal development. ('Wells's girls were, like myself,

³⁹ *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 2, 483-4.

sincere, honest, puzzled, and determined to be worthy of their noble feminist ancestresses.’)⁴⁰ Hence their incomprehension when faced with a representation of the suffragette they found unrecognizable. A review of *Ann Veronica* in *The Vote*, commented that ‘if such a woman existed, she would have been asked to take herself and her enthusiasm elsewhere by any of the existing Suffrage societies.’⁴¹

To the suffragettes it appeared that while Wells claimed to support women’s suffrage, he consistently ridiculed and pilloried the very women whose bravery had sent them to prison and his prominence and visibility as a public intellectual made him a primary target for suffragettes seeking greater commitment to their cause than he was able to give. Wells complained wearily of being ‘waylaid by ladies who sell me *The Vote* in an aggressive manner, shops full of green, white and purple articles of no particular merit are always getting in my way’.⁴²

As Patricia Stubbs points out, heroines ‘who are struggling for a degree of personal sexual freedom, are always disappointed by the suffragettes, by their narrowness, prejudice and sexual orthodoxy’.⁴³ In *Ann Veronica* the suffragette’s organiser, Kitty Brett (‘trained to an implacable mother to one end’) is recognizably a thinly-veiled Christabel Pankhurst and is caricatured by Wells for being ‘as capable of intelligent argument as a runaway steam roller’ (*AV*, 188). In fact, Christabel Pankhurst, who graduated with a first-class degree in law from Manchester University, was famed for her trained logical mind, although disqualified from practice at the bar because the legal profession was closed to women. When *Ann Veronica* ventures to suggest that “‘much of a woman’s difficulties are economic’” (*AV*, 189), Brett pleads with her not to get lost in a “‘wilderness of secondary considerations’” (*AV*, 189-90). In *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* (1914) the suffragette Agatha Alimony instructs Ellen Harman who contemplates leaving her husband to return immediately: “‘Very probably he will take all sorts of proceedings. It will be a matrimonial case. How can I be associated with that? We mustn’t mix up Women’s Freedom with Matrimonial Cases. Impossible! We dare not! A woman leaving her husband! Think of the weapon it gives our enemies. If once other things complicate the Vote – the Vote is lost.’”⁴⁴

By 1908 the Amber Reeves affair had rendered Wells *persona non grata* in both the Fabian Society and in the inner circles of the suffragettes’ – ‘To both these organisations I was an *enfant terrible* and not to be talked about’ – who considered him guilty of serious breaches of confidence in turning Amber Reeves’s seduction into fiction.⁴⁵ As Jane Marcus points out, Elizabeth Robins, the President of the

⁴⁰ Charlotte Haldane, *Truth Will Out* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1949), 15.

⁴¹ *The Vote*, 23 December 1909, 103.

⁴² Wells, ‘Mr. Asquith Will Die’, 47.

⁴³ Stubbs, *Women and Fiction*, 187.

⁴⁴ H. G. Wells, *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* (London: Odhams, 1915), 154.

⁴⁵ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 2, 484.

Women Writers' Suffrage League, was outraged when Wells's publisher, Heinemann, told her that 'Wells had denied in writing being the father of the girl's child, that child he told me he was so proud of bringing into the world!'⁴⁶ In correspondence with Robins he protested that 'There's absolutely nothing in *Ann Veronica* against the suffrage only a quite kindly criticism of the suffragette side of it.'⁴⁷ In Robins's own suffrage novel, *The Convert* (1908) the heroine, Vida Levering, speaks of Wells with disappointment and regret: "'He *is* my novelist. So I've a right to be sorry he knows nothing about women.'" Vida refers to the exclusion of women from the vision of the future offered in *The Day of the Comet*: 'The man says to the heroine – to his ideal woman he says, "Behind you and above you rises the coming City of the World, and I am in that building. Dear Heart! you are only happiness!"' Vida asks, "'Whose happiness?'"⁴⁸ Wells made what he considered an honest attempt to depict the 'suppressions and resentments that might lead a gentle woman to smash a plate-glass window' in *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* but again fell short of the mark and had to admit that 'no suffragette saw herself in my mirror.'⁴⁹

Much the same criticism can be made of Wells's depiction of the fictionalized suffragettes in *Ann Veronica* as of his depiction of the fictionalized Fabians. It is the restricted choice of representatives that invites the suspicion that he is intent on discrediting the cause by discrediting its exponents. If the suffragettes failed to see themselves in Wells's mirror it was perhaps because Wells had failed to recognize the extent to which the women's suffrage movement was a broad church in which there was a wide spectrum of views to be had on sexual matters. Well-known activists such as Hannah Billington, Sylvia Pankhurst, and Dora Marsden, for example, were all in different ways, sexual radicals intent on making the case for the importance of sex in the creation of new worlds to replace the old. Indeed Rebecca West's 'finest contribution to British left-wing political thought and the struggle or the vote was her insistence that sex be taken seriously'.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Jane Marcus, introduction to Elizabeth Robins, *The Convert* (London: Women's Press, 1980), v-xvi (xii).

⁴⁷ Quoted in Angela John, *Elizabeth Robins: Staging a Life, 1862-1952* (London: Routledge, 1995), 173.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Robins, *The Convert* (London: Macmillan, 1907), 208-9.

⁴⁹ *Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 2, 485.

⁵⁰ Jane Marcus, introduction to Rebecca West, *The Judge* (1922) (London: Virago, 1980).